Studying Early Childhood

Part 1: Making the transition to studying at degree level: becoming an active learner.

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Becoming an active learner.

Embarking on any degree involves a step-change in any student's approach to learning, but knowing what's involved and appreciating why certain learning strategies matter can help you make the most of the experience.

This series aims to help you realise what's expected of you as a learner if you decide to start on a childhood degree course. Rather than focussing on the *content* of childhood degrees- courses are too varied for that – it highlights the *processes* which underpin successful learning at this level. Each part will outline effective, and ineffective, ways of going about study, giving you ideas for what to do and things to definitely avoid. You should use these strategies alongside the actual material being studied on your specific degree.

Learning to think differently.

Research shows that most people come to university believing that knowledge in formal educational settings is certain, fixed and absolute (Kember, 2001). The overall aim of a degree, however, is to help you move beyond this, achieving the kind of intellectual growth where you realise that things are rarely cut and dried, and that there are no clear, objective, right-or-wrong answers In other words, doing a degree helps you move from 'absolute knowing' to 'contextual knowing' (Perry, 1970).

This means that learning at university is not predominantly about gathering information, or acquiring more knowledge. Instead learning is transformative: it's about learning to think and see in the complex and subtle ways that a disciplinary specialist does (Meyer & Land, 2005; Moon, 2005). This involves focussing on concepts and developing an enduring understanding, rather than acquiring facts. It means learning to balance different standpoints and view ideas in context, so you tune in to the subtleties and nuances of any situation. It also means questioning some of the beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that you may have previously assimilated. This all entails higher order thinking, in which gradually you become more critical and analytical by thinking laterally, creatively and innovatively.

Research though, also shows us that university students approach their studies in line with the view of learning they hold. If they assume university tasks require them to gather and reproduce lots of facts and information, rather than actively make sense of material to achieve a long-term understanding, that's what they set out to do (Marton et al, 1997). It's not a question of being clever; it's a question of sussing the rules of the game. That's why it's useful to appreciate what, in broad terms, degree level study aims to help you do.

Active learning

To develop the higher order cognitive development we've just been talking about requires active learning strategies. Active learning is a dynamic process, with things going on in your brain. *You* need to do the work, actively making connections and organising learning into meaningful concepts and understandings (Barkley, 2009). It's essential to grapple with the ideas and concepts at the core of the discipline, transforming and reflecting on content and linking it to what you already know to make your own interpretations, which continually shift and grow.

In short, from this viewpoint, *you,* not your teachers, have the biggest part to play. This is poles apart from the model of learning most students come with when they arrive at university. Most expect to sit in lecture halls, simply writing down whatever their lecturers tell them. They expect knowledge to be simply transferred into their heads as if they were empty vessels into which information is poured. As a result, they adopt surface approaches to learning which don't stand them in good stead during their academic careers or in future professional practice (Boud et al, 2010).

This might all sound a bit abstract and daunting, but don't worry- your lecturers will expect to guide you carefully through. Besides, many students say this is very like becoming a child again- curious, inquisitive, always asking 'why?' It's fascinating and fun, as well as challenging and hard work.

Getting involved in learning communities

Especially in the early stages of a degree, active learning can be a highly social activity. You have lots to gain from engaging in dialogue, so be prepared to interact with others to improve your learning.

Because making the move to studying childhood at university basically involves seeing childhood afresh, in new and increasingly complicated ways, at the outset most courses will encourage you to identify and take stock of what you already know about children and childhood, whether that is theoretical knowledge, the practical work of bringing up children, professional practice, or your own experience of being a child. Talking with your fellow students helps you get a taste of what it means to become deeply involved in exploring, discussing and debating a range of varying ideas and perspectives on the possible meanings of childhood.

At the start of any unit, for instance, lecturers are likely to ask you to identify your own personal views of the child-related topics they teach by discussing your views with other students. This is not just a social chat, pleasant and useful as that may be. They want you to realise that anyone's views of what is right, proper and good for children are 'loaded,' rather than neutral. Getting involved in class discussions about other's views and beliefs helps you to experience, at first hand, how variable assumptions about children are, so you see that talking about childhood is actually a very demanding thing to do.

Even if you already have lots of practical experience, then, you should soon begin to see things very differently as an active learner, questioning your practices and beliefs about children and childhood as you think more deeply about the issues and the possible implications of different theories or ideas. You are on the right lines if you start to question what you previously 'knew' – or failed even to register – beforehand.

Students often say studying in this way is like suddenly waking up, which is why it seems very different from previous study:

'It makes you think a lot more, think in different ways. There are things you accept before you come here that you don't happen to think about, unless you study this course. Things occur to me now, that I wouldn't have thought about before – in everyday life.'

Learning to ask yourself questions about why people hold certain values, or how people construct and reveal views of children's needs is essential to studying childhood. It means you're beginning to be analytical and critical. You can learn

a lot through talking to people and observing what they say and do, in university and beyond.

Gradually, your lecturers will set academic reading which will help you to analyse children's lives and environments; the products and policies that are made for them; their experiences and the views of professionals who work with and for them. Tackling this effectively will be the focus of the next article in the series, but in a nutshell, exploring theory is simply another means of interacting with ideas and meanings associated with 'the child,' helping you achieve a deeper level of insight. It equips you to carry out or enact, rather than just know about, your subject.

STRATEGIES FOR BECOMING AN ACTIVE LEARNER

Below are a few pointers about how you might become an active learner. The first section concentrates on how to approach the taught sessions that typify most degree programmes. The second focuses on learning communities you might build, within and beyond the university classroom.

ENGAGING ACTIVELY WITH TEACHING SESSIONS

Try to use sessions to tap in to the relevant issues, identifying the 'big questions,' issues and debates. Use them to rehearse your responses to different ways of addressing them, rather than using them to gather information or get the 'correct' line of thought.

Lectures

These generally involve large groups of students. The lecturer will cover core ideas that everyone needs to get their heads round, but may bring in small-group discussion, question-and-answer sessions or debates.

- Don't just turn up: prepare in advance. If the lecturer has set reading, get hold of it and make notes on anything you don't understand. If there is a PowerPoint on the E-Learning portal, download it before the lecture and take it along. You can then annotate it, with questions to pursue, links to other material and so on.

- During the lecture, don't just write down what the lecturer says. Instead, make notes on the main points, issues, controversies and ideas. Join in with discussion activities.
- Afterwards, discuss your notes with other students over coffee.

Seminars

Here you generally work in small-groups on pre-prepared material.

- Do your homework and go to the session prepared to contribute. Even if it's not 'marked' – joining in will really help you develop your understanding before it 'counts' in assessed work.
- Make notes of any feedback you get, from peers as well as tutors.
- Try to open up, rather than close down, discussions, so you and your fellow students practise using relevant ideas.

Tutorials

This tends to be your chance to discuss your learning intensively with a lecturer. You set the agenda and talk about any difficulties, gain feedback on your ideas when preparing an assignment or discuss your progress and devise action plans.

- Prepare notes beforehand of things you want feedback on (e.g. an essay plan, uncertainties you have about core concepts or reading for a module).
- List questions you want to ask about to help you better understand the topic (e.g. getting clarification on a theory).
- Don't waste this precious time by asking procedural questions that can be answered elsewhere (e.g. word limits, deadline dates, where to hand in assignments – your course administrator or handbooks can tell you).

Engaging actively in learning communities.

Get personally involved.

Do things which help you to make sense of your learning about early childhood. Try to understand a range of viewpoints. Join in debates. Discuss ideas. Link information/concepts and look for patterns of ideas. Connect new learning to what you know already. Learn by putting your ideas forward. Rehearse aloud to see if you have grasped complex ideas. It's much easier to do this with friends, than wait until assessment, when the stakes are high.

- Informally discuss lectures with classmates over coffee.
- Explain ideas and why they are important to friends or family.
- Create a poster with peers, explaining a concept or different perspectives on an issue.

Become critical and analytical.

Examine beliefs about childhood from many angles. Avoid taking things at face value. Tune into hidden agendas. Always ask 'why?' Compare the same issue from different theorists' points of view. Weigh up the arguments for and against something. Look for paradoxes and contradictions.

- Interview different people about their views of, say, children's learning, or play, or behaviour. Think carefully about the words people use to discuss them. Contrast them.
- Look for newspaper articles or adverts about early childhood and compare how they represent the young.

Be creative.

Use your imagination. Search for patterns and connections. Ask questions, be curious. Think laterally. Weigh up how others see things. Use new concepts (such as the social construction of childhood) in different situations.

- Get together with peers to design a school according to one view of the child's needs. Then try and do it for a different view.
- Play devil's advocate, making the case for something you don't personally believe in.

Be reflective.

Analyse and evaluate. Start to recognise controversies of fact, policy, value and definition and weigh them up. Try to imagine the possible implications of certain views and perspectives.

- Compare your views of when children should start school with other students.
- Debate whether it was better to be a child in your grandparents' day, giving reasons for your views.

Conclusions

Developing a critical, questioning habit of mind is a lifelong quality, but it can't be done *for* you, it has to be done *by* you. In the words of one of our Childhood students at Northumbria: 'The only way is to have a go and get stuck in!'

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